Volume III.
Number 10.

Week of
April 27, 1942

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS 1942

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THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, 235 East 22nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
$15.00

"Keep 'Em Laughing"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
April 25, 1942

'Keep 'Em Laughing' At 44th St. Theatre

William Gaxton and Victor Moore Head New Vaudeville Revue

By JOHN ANDERSON

HAVING established "Priorities of 1942" and proved that there is still the breath of life in vaudeville, Mr. Fischer tried another whiff of the pulmotors last night at the Forty-Fourth st. theatre where another program of the two-a-day called "Keep 'Em Laughing" opened with another star-studded cast.

Though it contains such favorites as Victor Moore, William Gaxton, the Hartmans, Hildegarde, Jack Cole and a very funny newcomer named Zero Mostel the show is not quite up to its senior partner but since it contains a dog act called "The Bricklayers" that alone is worth the price of admission I can recommend it heartily. It wants editing badly. Some of the numbers ought to be cut, and others cut out, if only to shorten a program that runs on towards midnight.

Gaxton Acts as M. C.

The Messrs. Gaxton and Moore have, of course, some notable musical comedy successes to their credit and in the present sketchwork they reveal the lamentable absence of a book. Mr. Gaxton, who is a dynamic advertisement for all the more popular vitamins, acts as an occasional master of ceremonies, and has a moderately amusing sketch of a bingy Hollywood author called "Authoritis."

The incomparable Mr. Moore, the drolliest comic on our stage, is left pretty much to his own devices and he has gone back to the vaudeville act which served him for years and years, a celebrated piece of old-fashioned humor called "Change Your Act, or Back to the Woods."

The sad truth is that the sketch is badly dated, that it is no longer good enough for Mr. Moore's ripened and unique talent, and that the biggest help the show could get would be a fine new number for one of the country's topflight comics. In a short sketch with Mr. Gaxton at the very end Mr. Moore has a chance to touch the inimitable character that is his trade-mark, half-Throttlebottom and half-Milquetoast but wholly hilarious, and for that brief moment, in which he is trying desperately to buy simply a plain, white handkerchief from a super-salesman, Mr. Moore is superb.

Dogs Steal Show

If anyone had bet me that a Broadway audience would find it itself gurgling happily over the incredible antics of some trained dogs I would have thought them crazy and lost my money. For "The Bricklayers" is better than anything of its sort I have ever seen—a troupe of dogs dressed as workmen, who cart bricks, lumber, etc., and go up and down ladders to a scaffold they are working on. One of them has an accident and plays dead; the boss dog goes into a corner saloon and comes out plastered and reeling, and a dog ambulance arrives to move the injured, while a lady dog, all in black, mourns pathetically. It is fantastic, fascinating and unbelievable.

The other members of the company will, I trust, forgive me for devoting so much attention to their canine show-stealers, but these dogs certainly deserve their day. Miriam La Velle turns in some expert acrobatic dancing, and the Stuart Morgan dancers achieve wonders if you are interested in their special brand of tossing torsos.

Effective Dancing

Jack Cole performs with his accustomed bizarre orientalism (though the two numbers are too much alike). The Hartmans go through their famous razzing of the ballroom dancers (they would be more effective if they were less generous), and Hildegarde sings some songs (her best stunt is with a couple of soldiers picked at random out of the audience), and Fred Sanborn plays with a mixture of brilliance and goofiness upon a xylophone.

Mr. Mostel is an immensely funny fellow, with some vigorous ideas of burlesque, and his portrait of a yammering senator is a little masterpiece.

It is great to have new talent turning up, and significant that it now comes from night clubs. But the return of vaudeville suggests that night club entertainers need direction and help before they fit easily into the old vaudeville pattern. As soloists they seem to have a tendency to do as much on a big program as they would do alone in an intimate night spot. This is fatal to the pace of the show, and to its sense of swift variety. Some of them are too generous, and even with first rate stuff the trick is still to leave the audience wanting more.

And one of the things that killed vaudeville, if I may end with a warning, was that it copied itself.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
April 26, 1942

Vaudeville Offers Further Proof That It Isn't Dead

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

JUDGING by the goings-on at the 44th St. theater Friday night, vaudeville made it two straight. *Keep 'Em Laughing* certainly has neither the high spots nor the high spirits of *Priorities of 1942*, but on the whole it is a better balanced job, with merit in unexpected places, and at popular prices it is nothing to sniff at. At any rate, not these days.

The real weakness of *Keep 'Em Laughing* turns out to be its headliners. Legends die hard; but I'm afraid it is no longer possible to say that Victor Moore can do no wrong. He himself is still a fine fellow, but if anything should have been allowed to sleep the sleep of the just, it is his ancient skit, *Change Your Act, or Back to the Woods;* and reviving it can only be described as a piece of graveyard vandalism. Late in the show he teams up with Billy Gaxton in another sketch, which is better, or at any rate briefer. Mr. Gaxton just about gets by in a skit of his own, but is no suaver than your little daughter Rosabel at introducing some of the other folks at the party. At such moments there is a terrific need for a Master of Ceremonies like Lou Holtz.

* * *

Hildegarde also seems to me of slender help to the show. What seems spontaneous about her in a night club becomes a little arch and over-assured in a huge theater; and her songs also stand up better in an atmosphere of intimacy and dim lights. Indeed, of the headliners, only the Hartmans do anything like a headline job. However familiar their dancing, it is still at its best enormously funny; and they themselves are enjoyable personalities, though I wish they would talk less and dance more.

* * *

The really notable thing of the evening is The Bricklayers, a trained-dog act which is, so far as I know, the best and most delightful animal act in history. The dogs, impersonating workmen, carry hods up ladders, act drunk, sham dead, turn acrobats, and do a dozen unbelievable things with perfect timing and immense charm.

Jack Cole and His Dancers do some very good eccentric Oriental numbers; Miriam La Velle does some exciting acrobatic dancing; and to prove how unorthodox are the merits of *Keep 'Em Laughing*, Fred Sanborn actually proves helpful on the xylophone.

Keep 'Em Laughing is a show where, for once, the best apples lie at the bottom of the barrel.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
April 25, 1942

Moore, Gaxton Head New Variety Revue

"Keep 'Em Laughing," vaudeville show starring Victor Moore and William Gaxton, presented at the 44th St. Theatre April 24, 1942.

★ ★ ★

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

THE corpse of good old vaudeville, which stirred vigorously and surprisingly a few weeks ago when "Priorities" established itself as a solid hit, got right up and did a clog dance at the 44th St. last night when Victor Moore, William Gaxton and their assisting clowns arrived with "Keep 'Em Laughing."

The new variety show is even more heavily larded with comedy, good and bad, than with its forerunner. But it has a superior production, a truer vaudeville flavor, and much better pace. As to talent, it's better in the supporting acts but the headliners haven't the solid punch packed by the four boys two blocks uptown.

Victor Moore was wonderful, as ever, in his "in one" nonsense with his old pal and partner, Gaxton. The Hartmans are expert dancing clowns and Hildegarde is still an appealing singer of taste and distinction.

There are a bunch of dogs who build and tear down a house, sans trainer, who are simply wonderful. The Bricklayers. There is a new comic from Cafe Society who was a near sensation. Zero Mostel. There is the magnificent dancer, Jack Cole, who has added the able and pretty Virginia Millar to his troupe and whose East Indian dances, set to jive music, are breathtaking. There is an excellent acrobatic dancer named Miriam LaVelle and the flying adagio team of Stuart Morgan. Plus the dancing Shirley Paige, the 18 Al White lovelies and two good pantomime comedians in Kitty Mattern and Fred Sanborn.

This show will probably be even better in a few days. There's no sense in having Victor Moore's long, and long-forgotten sketch follow on the heels of William Gaxton's long sketch. And if it's vaudeville they're doing, somebody ought to sing at least one song before 11 o'clock. There is too much of the Hartmans, good as they are, and not enough of Jack Cole. But these are flaws which can be easily corrected if anybody wants to.

"Keep 'Em Laughing"

NEW YORK SUN
April 25, 1942

'Keep 'Em Laughing,' More Vaudeville, Is Offered at the 44th Street

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

IT IS good theatrical doctrine that lightning strikes any number of times in the same place, and this explains "Keep 'Em Laughing," a vaudeville revue which opened last evening at the 44th Street Theater. If "Priorities of 1942," which is a vaudeville revue, is a hit, then the way to have another hit is to put on a show as much like "Priorities of 1942" as is conveniently possible. You can't get around logic like that—not in show business.

The slight difficulty we encounter here, however, is that "Keep 'Em Laughing," although it is full of good people, isn't as unpretentiously gay and funny as "Priorities." Obviously it should be. It has Victor Moore in it and William Gaxton; it has the Hartmans, who are always entertaining, and Hildegarde and an adagio dance and some trained dogs and a pretty comical fellow called Zero Mostel. It has some oddly exciting dances by Jack Cole and his associates, who have trained themselves in East Indian rhythms, and it has a chorus line which is perfectly all right. Add all these together and it is evident that merriment should be unrestrained. I am afraid, however, that merriment isn't.

Mr. Moore is not really funny until around 11:30, for one pretty big thing. Much earlier he does one of his old vaudeville numbers—"Change Your Act or Back to the Woods"—but this is not really vintage Moore. (Or perhaps it has been too long in the bottle.) It shows, chiefly, that Mr. Moore is much funnier now than he was in the old, old days and has usually much better material. It isn't until he drops in toward the tag-end of a very long evening to buy a white handkerchief of Mr. Gaxton and ends up with a pearl-handled six-shooter that either he or Mr. Gaxton is really himself.

To find Mr. Moore a disappointment naturally throws a pall over the evening. The dog act is good, if you like dog acts. The Hartmans are funny, if you like the Hartmans, and I do. Hildegarde is lively and likable, as you may know, and has her special way with songs. She doesn't, for me, make up for Mr. Moore's partial eclipse. (You can't totally eclipse Mr. Moore. After all, he is there, and you laugh when you look at him.) Zero Mostel, a night-club entertainer just now emerging, is an amusing imitator and will work himself to the bone—a good distance with Mr. Mostel—in doing his duty by comedy. You can find many pleasant things, if you pick and choose.

The management has done very little picking and choosing on its own account, and the show is at least half an hour too long. I am afraid that, in addition, it seldom displays its accomplished entertainers to their best advantage. Imagine finding it possible to keep a straight face with Victor Moore on the stage! Something wrong there.

'KEEP 'EM LAUGHING'

A vaudeville revue in two acts, presented by Clifford C. Fischer, by arrangement with the Messrs. Shubert, at the Forty-fourth Street Theater on April 24, 1942. In the cast are William Gaxton, Victor Moore, the Hartmans, Hildegarde, Jack Cole and his dancers, Zero Mostel, the Stuart Morgan Dancers, the Bricklayers, Fred Sanborn, Miriam La Velle, Kitty Mattern and Shirley Paige.

NEW YORK TIMES
April 25, 1942

Victor Moore, Bill Gaxton, Hildegarde and the Hartmans in a New Variety Show

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HAVING chosen "Keep Em Laughing" as title of the new vaudeville show that went on at the Forty-fourth Street last evening, they are as good as their word. For some of it is tremendously funny and none of it is dull. Teetery Victor Moore is on hand in tight pants and a brown derby, obviously laboring under the weight of his illustrious "Change Your Act or Back to the Woods," although none of his friends will hold that against him. Bill Gaxton, who has been secretly acquiring poundage, contributes an amusing cartoon of a drunken author earning a dishonest living in Hollywood.

The Hartmans, who are the most comical dancers in the world, conclude the first half of the program with some routines that are masterpieces of buffoonery. Add to all that Zero Mostel, who is taking his hoarse and messy drolleries into a theatre for the first time, and you have a vaudeville bill that is overflowing with hilarity.

• • •

If vaudeville performers could be persuaded to get off the stage when their act is finished, this courier might have remained in the theatre long enough to see Mr. Moore and Mr. Gaxton in the concluding sketch of the evening. At a quarter past eleven the cool and impish Hildegarde was singing songs with equal portions of music and personality, and all right, too, if it comes to that. Since Mr. Moore's old routine of slapstick from long ago is a little on the obvious side, it would have been pleasant to see him in his best form again.

But there is plenty of other stuff for general guffawing. Take Fred Sanborn, clowning over the xylophone with gags that entertain quite low in the diaphragm, or the trained dogs who do a versatile building act in a number called "The Bricklayers," or the Stuart Morgan dancers in a throw-the-body adagio turn. Mixed up with some satisfactory acrobatic dancing by Miriam La Velle and some chorus exercises by the Al White Beauties, they lay the groundwork for an animated variety show.

• • •

During the past few weeks Zero Mostel has been having a resounding success in night club and radio. He deserves it, in spite of a weakness he has for imitations. He is a roly-poly zany with a voice that rattles in the cellar, eyes that cross and a face that gets foolishly distorted when he is making a political speech. For a first appearance in a large theatre he is doing remarkably well.

This department may be permitted a little private rejoicing over the crack-brained antics of the Hartmans. It is too late to discover them. The Hartmans have been clowning in the neighborhood for a long time. But what they do is always fresh, for they are intelligent people who know the value of a pose in comic profile and a pause in speaking dialogue, and they shine in each other's company. What a map Paul Hartman has! It is especially ludicrous when his mood is lyric and his teeth protrude into the night. In these lampoons of ballroom dancing, he is the adenoidal, three-flushing American goon, and while he performs Grace wears the frozen smile of connubial apprehension. It is very fine stuff. And it is the high point of a remarkably good vaudeville entertainment.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
April 25, 1942

More Vaudeville

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

HERE is vaudeville back again, this time in a dancing mood, in a show called "Keep 'Em Laughing." Although it is not nearly so funny as "Priorities of 1942" and lacks some of the happy informality of its predecessor, "Keep 'Em Laughing" is a vigorous and lively entertainment, containing everything from a dog act to a torch singer. Such prominent performers as Victor Moore, William Gaxton, the Hartmans, Hildegarde and the new comic called Zero Mostel dart about with considerable aplomb, giving of their art in what is likely to be another demonstration of the fact that the variety show is the most animated of the theater's alleged corpses. I am decidedly a "Priorities" fan, but the new work has its points.

• • •

It is not being harsh to the show at the Forty-fourth Street Theater to say that the number I somehow remember with most pleasure is the aforementioned dog act. The canine group known as the Bricklayers, that goes gravely about the business of building a house and attending to their drinking in a near-by saloon, constitutes what is easily the best and most amusing dog act I have ever encountered, and I am an enthusiastic fan for such animal entertainments. In the face of such eminent competition, even Victor Moore, the best loved of American comedians, is forced into a subordinate position, in great part because his ancient number, "Change Your Act or Go Back to the Woods," which served him in such good stead for so many years, proves to have aged far less pleasantly than has Mr. Moore.

• • •

Chiefly "Keep 'Em Laughing" is a dancers' show. Most prominent among the terpsichoreans is that agreeably satirical team, the Hartmans, who are getting to be experts at verbal comedy, too. A group known simply as Jack Cole and His Dancers offers some gay and attractive numbers that are presumably East Indian and that add considerably to the virtues of the evening. Mr. Moore has a pretty assistant in the person of Miss Shirley Paige, who likewise dances pleasantly, while Miss Miriam La Velle does commendable convolutions and some chorus girls perform the gestures peculiar to their craft. Then there is an adagio team, wherein, as is the custom, three apparently stalwart young men toss a little blonde about the landscape. Being a veteran of vaudeville, I can remember back to the days when it took just one male adagio dancer to handle the female of the team.

• • •

In addition to acting as master of ceremonies Mr. Gaxton has an agreeable enough sketch about the adventures of a Hollywood scenario writer and adds his customary briskness to the proceedings. A pleasant comic named Fred Sanborn performs amusingly upon that curious instrument, the xylophone, and there is a number demonstrating classifications of laughter, which seemed to me rather academic in its mirth. Then there is the aforementioned Zero Mostel, a large and damp young man, who has become the new hero of the night clubs. Mr. Mostel does impressions of such varying personages as an isolationist Senator, Jimmy Durante, Charles Boyer and a jitterbug, and, while he has a mobile face, considerable cleverness and a fresh approach to his subject matter, I suspect that he still has quite a bit to learn about being funny. "Keep 'Em Laughing" is a pretty good vaudeville show.

"Keep 'Em Laughing"

NEW YORK POST
April 25, 1942

"Keep 'Em Laughing" A New Variety Show At the 44th Street

By WILELLA WALDORF

CLIFFORD C. FISCHER, who brought back what some people call vaudeville recently at the 46th Street Theatre under the title, "Priorities of 1942," has hastened to follow up that success with a new variety show, "Keep 'Em Laughing" revealed last night at the 44th Street Theatre.

The stars of last night's presentation were William Gaxton, Victor Moore, Hildegarde and the Hartmans, and we are astounded, even alarmed, to report today that the only part of last night's show that kept us laughing with any gusto was a dog act called The Bricklayers.

Lest we be set down as an old sourpuss unable to appreciate the art of vaudeville, let it be stated that we have seen "Priorities" twice and enjoyed it each time. If we return to "Keep 'Em Laughing," which seems doubtful at present, it will be to watch The Bricklayers at work.

Trick Dogs at Work

People who enjoy staring into excavations or watching hod-carriers mess around with mortar will be enchanted with the slap-dash construction methods of the trained dogs who are building something or other on the stage of the 44th Street Theatre. Dogs scampering up ladders, falling through trap-doors, upsetting loads of brick, getting drunk at a nearby saloon; dogs playing horse, riding kiddie-kars, wearing widows' weeds, and finally dogs doing trapeze stunts, careening through the air with the greatest of ease.

"Keep 'Em Laughing," as its title would suggest, is designed primarily to be a laugh show, and its major trouble lies in the depressing fact that its two star comedians, Gaxton and Moore, are not very funny in it.

We have no objection to old material. Willie Howard, Phil Baker and Lou Holtz are getting off plenty of ancient wheezes over at the 46th Street, and we had seen most of the skits before, but they're still funny.

It sounded like a good idea to exhume Victor Moore's old vaudeville number, "Change Your Act or Back to the Woods," which he played over the circuit for years and years, finally laying it away in moth-balls in 1924. But it doesn't seem very comic now, not even with Victor Moore in it. Mr. Moore is one of this department's favorite comedians. We suffered for him last night.

When it was over, Mr. Moore remarked to the audience: "I thought that was dead and buried years ago."

It was and it should have been left to rest in peace.

Mr. Gaxton offered a fairly amusing drunk act in an overlong sketch about a Hollywood scenario writer trying to turn out a film epic while intoxicated, and later, around eleven-thirty, just before the finale, Gaxton and Moore came on together in a familiar piece about a fellow trying to buy a plain white handkerchief in a men's clothing store. It gave Gaxton a chance to do that act of his showing how a woman gets into a girdle, and afterward to sing some of his former song hits, from "Of Thee I Sing," etc.

The Good Old Days

Thus reminded of the dear old days of Wintergreen and Throttlebottom, there must have been many a tear-stained cheek in the first-night audience.

Both the Hartmans, an amusing pair of dancers who burlesque ball-room twirling, and Hildegarde, who—er—sings and plays the piano, seemed to be somewhat dampened by the size of the 44th Street Theatre. They are at their best, no doubt, in what the late Heywood Broun used to call "the small, closed places."

It was this reviewer's first glimpse of the lady known as Hildegarde and we should say that she is at a loss with the audience too far away to take into her lap and cuddle. She finally induced two soldiers to go up on the stage last night for a few smacks and some petting, but they didn't stay long and the gentlemen in the front row at whom she winked and cooed were unresponsive.

A New Mimic

Zero Mostel, the rotund comedian who has made something of a name for himself in night clubs and radio, made his stage debut last night and proved to be a very talented young man at mimicry, contortion and good-natured spoofing of everything from Congressmen to jitterbugs at Roseland. He has the rare accomplishment of agitating his double-chin to considerable effect in tremulous moments. He, too, seemed to suffer somewhat from the lack of intimacy in his surroundings, but he carried off his part of the proceedings well on the whole. Fred Sanborn, a comic xylophonist, also had his merry moments.

"Keep 'Em Laughing" may be no terrific wow as a laugh show, but it does display some expert dancing. Miriam La Velle opens the evening with a fine display of acrobatic terpsichore. Jack Cole and his troupe adapt East Indian style to jazz tempos with interesting results, and the Stuart Morgan company gives a breath-taking adagio performance. Shirley Paige, who appears in Victor Moore's act, is a charming ballerina.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
April 27, 1942

Keep 'Em Laughing Opens With Moore and Gaxton

By JOHN MASON BROWN

HAVING succeeded in Priorities of 1942 in bringing vaudeville triumphantly back to life, Clifford C. Fischer has attempted in Keep 'Em Laughing to do variety another good turn. His lineup at the 44th Street Theater is a good one. It promises much. It even raises the same high hopes which are realized at the 46th Street. But, though the formula is almost identical, Mr. Fischer's two vaudeville shows are separated by far more than a mere two blocks.

The headliners in Priorities are Lou Holtz, Willie Howard, Phil Baker and Paul Draper. The headliners in Keep 'Em Laughing are Victor Moore, William Gaxton, the Hartmans and Hildegarde. On the basis of old attachments, you might guess in advance that of the two teams, Keep 'Em Laughing is the one to enjoy a slight advantage.

Everyone loves Victor Moore, and with reason. He is one of the funniest of our great funny men; a pathetic, rotund little fellow who all these many years has been winning guffaws by being so downright helpless and pathetic. Everyone knows Mr. Gaxton's furious energy, too, and has relished those contortions with which he has wriggled his way through countless happily remembered songs. Most people who get about at night have also seen the Hartmans, and recognize them for the superior parodists they are of the absurdities of ballroom dancing. And even those who have heard her croon only on a Victrola record hold Hildegarde in high esteem.

So far, so good (really much more than that) as you approach Keep 'Em Laughing with a grin on your face. But this is before The Star-Spangled Banner has been played and the curtain has gone up.

* * *

Not that there are no good numbers in Mr. Fischer's newest vaudeville. There are some. The Hartmans live up to expectations. Jack Cole and his dancers are both skillful and exotic. Fred Sanborn knows his way around a xylophone. Zero Mostel is a fat fellow from the night clubs who, with his eyes crossed, can imitate perfectly the rumblings of a politician. The Stuart Morgan dancers are incredibly precise at tossing a lady about unchivalrously. And Miriam La Velle is a young woman who has a fine disregard for the law of gravity.

But I never thought I would see the day when a dog act would steal a show from Mr. Gaxton and Mr. Moore or seem superior to Hildegarde. Yet this is exactly what happens in Keep 'Em Laughing. Those canines known as The Bricklayers are the evening's high point. They are magnificently trained and do a job at home-building which contractors would do well to imitate. At least they keep moving about.

* * *

The trouble with Keep 'Em Laughing is that, though the dogs work like human beings the human beings are forced to work like dogs, and the cupboard to which they have gone is almost bare. No one seeing Mr. Moore for the first time would ever guess, for example, how superb a comic he is from that old vaudeville sketch, Change Your Act or Go Back to the Woods, which he has dug up from the bottom of his trunk. Nor are Mr. Moore and Mr. Gaxton seen to more than very mild advantage in the number called A Small Purchase.

One of the evening's most serious defects is that it likable though he is, Mr. Gaxton appears to be utterly lost as a master of ceremonies. He lacks Mr. Holtz's wonderful assurance. He has no patter and is unable to pull the proceedings together. His delivery, moreover, is so uncertain that he only adds to the production's uncertainty. Vaudeville may be alive in Keep 'Em Laughing, but most often during an uncomfortable evening it is gasping for breath.

"What Big Ears!"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
April 21, 1942

Whistler's Mother Takes a Beating

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE theater extended its losing streak last night, this time with one of those silly and rachitic farces that announce the coming of Spring. *What Big Ears!* struggles hard and long without managing to be funny even once. The copious plot thickens, widens, deepens and above all lengthens to no avail. The cast goes in for gymnastics and liquor and live rabbits, but without success.

The thing has to do with a pitchman and his wife who are stranded in Hollywood without a dime, their only asset being their shill, an obliging young man who has been in the habit of dressing up as an old lady. This young man, who is a pleasant type of halfwit, answers a studio call for old ladies and manages in some way that I cannot explain to be chosen for the role of Whistler's Mother in a picture of that name. After that, of course, he has a heap of impersonating to do, offstage as well as on; and the rest of the evening is not so much *Whistler's Mother* as *Charley's Aunt*. But a very dismal *Charley's Aunt* indeed.

The production is pretty much in key with the play. Arthur Pierson's direction is at once frantic and flat, though in the circumstances it could hardly be otherwise. Ruth Weston, Edwin Philips, Reynolds Evans and Ethel Morrison perform blamelessly enough, but some of the others in the cast help contribute to the generally depressing effect.

'WHAT BIG EARS!'

A farce in three acts by Jo Eisinger and Judson O'Donnell; staged by Arthur Pierson; settings by Horace Armistead; presented at the Windsor Theater on April 20, 1942, by L. Daniel Blank and David Silberman. The cast:

Jean Martin	Ruth Weston
Joey Smithers	Edwin Philips
Gabby Martin	Taylor Holmes
Lucas	Owen Martin
Betty Leeds	Marilyn Erskine
Milford	Ralph Bunker
McCall	Owen Lamont
The Professor	Reynolds Evans
Muldoon	George Church
Police Lieutenant	Herbert Duffy
Olympe Grogan	Ethel Morrison
Dr. Treadle	Hans Roberts
Brewster	Frederick Howard

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
April 21, 1942

Open 'What Big Ears!' At Windsor Theatre

Ruth Weston and Taylor Holmes Star in Farce of Boy Dressed as Grandmother

By JOHN ANDERSON

PROBABLY from looking too long at "Charley's Aunt," or maybe just walking bare-headed in the tropical sun, the authors of "What Big Ears!" have apparently concluded that if a farce about a young man dressed up as the old lady from Brazil is funny, a farce about a lad dressed up as his own movie star grandmother will be twice as funny. It is hardly worth a visit to the Windsor Theatre to prove the authors' mathematics to be as bad as their playwrighting.

For Jo Eisinger and Judson O'Donnell have concocted a laborious little scamper that begins quietly and works itself up into the usual third act frenzy of letting the actors open doors and slam them or opening jokes and letting me slam them. A movie stenographer fainted dead away, but justifiably, when the youngster she had married seemed to turn out to be his own grandmother, and a near-sighted insurance doctor, sent to examine the old fraud, picked the wrong woman but the right sex.

Offered Movie Role

These somewhat dispiriting events came as the climax to a feeble plot about Gabby Martin, a pitchman, with a medicine spiel, who used a youngster, dressed up as an old lady, to impress the customers by stepping out of the crowd and telling how the miracle cure had fixed up her rheumatix. When Gabby and Mrs. Martin got stranded in Hollywood they persuaded young Joey to put on his wig and wrapper and take a day's work as a movie extra, and as luck and the authors would have it, Joey seemed such a fine old lady that the studio promptly made him an offer of a contract, to do three pictures and play Whistler's Mother.

Anyone who wants to take the trouble to see how imperceptible is Edwin Philips' resemblance to a grandmother on the stage at the Windsor can detect that the plot is probably the lowest estimate of Hollywood mentality yet made.

The rest of the play, of course, discloses the frantic efforts of Gabby and his wife to keep their fraud a secret and their goldmine intact. The worst happens when the newly made grandmother star is summoned to New York to meet the bankers, and they decide not to make any further investments without adequate insurance against hardening of the old lady's arteries. There is, presumably, no insurance against the quiet congealing of the gags.

Interesting Sketch

By reading over the biographical sketches in the back of the playbill I found that the actors were far more interesting in their so-called private lives than as the characters they were rummaging around in. Ruth Weston, for instance, got her big chance in the theatre when Ina Claire had an infected tooth and then had to appear, as understudy, with her arm in a sling because she had tried to fix a broken radio. The wireless is a mixed blessing. Miss Weston usually thinks the bank is wrong, but can't prove it, and is not only a fine cook, but she loves dogs. Plainly she deserves something better of life than "What Big Ears."

Edwin Philips when not playing grandma, (which may be often) builds ship models and as "a devotee of the outdoor life" he has, according to the playbill, "pitched his tent in every State in the Union." He is a good enough actor, I suppose, not to mind when a play pitches him, but after this one and "They Should Have Stood in Bed" he ought to be getting suspicious.

Low Comedy Leer

Now Ralph Bunker comes from Boston, and the playbill says he played "as a child" (fortunately) on the old Bunker farm, the site of the famous battle. Ethel Morrison, who comes from Australia, has a fine low comedy leer and tosses a bottle on the Windsor stage very heartily. Reynolds Evans once understudied for Polonius, George Church was a member of the Fokine Ballet, and Taylor Holmes is as ever the veteran stand-by, who seems to have impersonated everyone from Jeeter Lester to the President in "I'd Rather Be Right."

It seems a pity we couldn't meet all these accomplished folks without the intervention of a pair of authors. They might have made up a better play among themselves as they went along.

NEW YORK POST
April 21, 1942

"What Big Ears!" Enlivened by Ethel Morrison's Low Comedy Act

By WILELLA WALDORF

IT IS not surprising that the fantastic goings-on in Hollywood should inspire playwrights to turn out equally fantastic farces, but it is surprising that every now and then one of them gets produced.

A good farce requires expert stage technique from author, director and actors. A small slip-up in timing may ruin an entire scene. For every hit farce produced on Broadway, there are dozens of dreary slipshod affairs easily recognized as duds two minutes after the curtain has gone up.

"What Big Ears!", which opened last night at the Windsor Theatre is the latest exhibit to fizzle out like a damp firecracker, despite the efforts of an amazingly populous cast to keep it popping.

The idea behind it all probably sounded side-splitting while the authors were tinkling it up. Imagine Mr. and Mrs. Gabby Martin, who travel around the country selling "miracle medicine" to the boobs, stranded in Los Angeles, because of Mr. Martin's unfortunate predilection for playing the horses.

Joey Smithers, a boy adopted out of a carnival to dress up as a dear old white-haired grandma and endorse the product Mr. Martin sells, is palmed off on a movie agent for a mob scene full of old ladies, and is thereupon signed up at $500 a week to star in a screen version of Whistler's Mother.

The complications that ensue are not nearly as funny as their inventors obviously thought they would be, and there is a sense of strain about it all that is not conducive to innocent merriment on the part of even the most indulgent audience. The direction was of the stop-and-go variety, and some of the actors were uncertain of their lines now and then, for which we could not blame them.

Not until the middle of the third act did we get a genuine laugh out of "What Big Ears!", and that was when Ethel Morrison, as an aggressive and belligerent hotel slavey with a Cockney accent, put on a low comedy act in which she was vigorously plied with liquor and wound up in a horizontal position on the floor.

We suggest that the management throw the rest of "What Big Ears!" into the nearest ashcan, retaining Miss Morrison's act as a "short subject." The rest of the evening is sheer waste of time.

NEW YORK TIMES
April 21, 1942

Plot Out of Order

By BROOKS ATKINSON

OH, OH, OH! Nobody knows the trouble you get in by going to see plays on opening nights. Take, for instance, "What Big Ears!", which opened at the Windsor last evening. Jo Eisinger and Judson O'Donnell wrote it under the impression, perhaps, that "Charley's Aunt" is a brisk farce worth imitating. Taylor Holmes, Ruth Weston and Edwin Philips are appearing in it under the impression, no doubt, that an actor can keep out of mischief offstage if he is up to his ears in silliness on stage.

It is such an overpoweringly dull play that one line spoken by Ethel Morrison in the last act seems, by comparison, to be a masterpiece of wit. Playing the part of a chambermaid, she is cleaning up a hotel room with professional incompetence when Mr. Holmes elegantly exclaims: "Beat it, sister." "Beat what, may I ask, translent!" she grandly retorts. Things were at such a low ebb at the Windsor last evening that the stupefied customers lifted up their voices in grateful laughter. Oh, gosh!